

*SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA*  
RECORDING SESSIONS

*James Dennis*

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Thursday, May 26, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building  
Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY  
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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

WELCH: Ok Speak Now recording number 007. This is LeAnna Welch, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Thursday, May 26, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights era memories is Mr. James Dennis. Welcome.

DENNIS: Welcome. Thank you. Well, I grew up in an activist family, so being involved was very common for me. I grew up in Brenham, Texas where in sometime in the—between—1950 and 1953 in talking with my, my home boys...we were discussing segregation, and there were some in the group who said that segregation was gonna be with us always; it was never gonna do away with it. We graduated from high school in 1953 and, of course, in May 1954 the Supreme Court decision came down. And, I think I...I, I, I had taken the right side on that 'cause I thought that the change was possible. But, I left—I started off at—school at Texas Southern, then I went there one semester, and then I went in service, into the Air Force and got out of the Air Force in November of, of '57, and got accepted at Compton College in California. I started there in January of '58. Tuition was eight dollars and 50 cents when I went to Texas Southern, it was 100 and six dollars, graduated from L. A. State College then, it's now Cal State L. A., tuition was 47 dollars, so...education was free in California. So I'm a Freedom Rider from Los Angeles, even though Texas is home. I'm one of those, one of those groups—persons—who—one of the speakers this week—was talking about who went North or West and when the Movement got started, came back, 'cause I was well acquainted with Jim Crow, and partially got out of Texas because really there were—if you were—a college graduate, you had to teach school if you didn't want to go on to become a lawyer or a doctor or an Indian chief, it was a school teacher so, I really kinda had a prejudice against becoming a teacher. But I graduated in June 1961 with a degree in government and my first action after graduating was going on the Freedom Ride. I had been keeping up with what was going on in the South. I had no idea that I was going to get that involved...but I was at my friend's barber shop when one of his customers came in and said that, that they were gettin' a group together to go on a Freedom Rides and he really wanted to go but his mother wouldn't allow him to go. So I asked him, "Well, who do you call?" And he gave me the number, and I called them. So I didn't really go through any serious thinking and discussions with myself about whether or not I was going to go. When I heard that there was a possibility, I was ready then, and so, the next time they contacted me, they told me I was gonna be leaving Saturday, July the 15<sup>th</sup>, and that the group that I, I had just missed a group going down, so they sent me down alone, on Delta, on a champagne flight. I don't cham—drink—champagne. I've managed to live without ever being a drinker so. But I did watch them pour champagne on the way down and I spent the night in New Orleans with the Castle family as so many others had before me. And I got on the train on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July in New Orleans headed to

Jackson. Got off the train in Jackson, and the strange thing was that there was no one on the side that I got off. Where all the other people on train had gone, I didn't know, all I saw was a few guys with white socks on, who I assumed was the police, and what seemed like a mile, I started walking towards the station, I know it was only maybe 40 or 50 yards, but, I walked down that...gang plank, into the White waiting room and Captain Ray was there, waiting. I sat down, and he said, "You got to move on." I refused, and he put me under arrest for breach of peace and that's how I got...that's how I really became a Freedom Rider, and spent the night in the city jail, and on Monday then we went to trial. Jack Young, the attorney, asked Captain Ray, "If I ask you the same questions that I've asked you before, would your answers be the same?" and he said, "Yes" and that was the court—that was the court—that was the trial that day. All of us—a group had come down from Nashville—got arrested that same day that I did, so in the book I'm associated with that group. But I, I went down alone and, we all—after the trial—we went to Hinds County Jail, and, which is a pretty filthy place. Then I don't know how many days later they put us in the back of a pickup truck and hauled us off to, what I now know to be Parchman, and I spent my—we were recruited in California for six months 'cause that was the sentence for breach of peace. But when we got down here we found out that people from the East were recruited for 39 days, and I think you had to appeal...in 39 days or you had to complete the sentence, so I got out in 39 days like everyone else did, and went home. I didn't tell my parents that I was gonna go. It would've been all right with my dad, but, mama would have been...mother, mother was afraid of White folks. I mean she warned me all the time about not doing this, not doing that, 'cause of what would happen and I guess that moms—throughout the South—did that because it, it was kind of dangerous I mean...Jet Magazine has said that a guy got arrested in South Carolina for reckless eyeballing, so, all of that was possible, so, I went back and to California and didn't have a job. I still had some G. I. bills so I went back to school and, so I was doing post-graduate work, and got a job at Goodwill because I refused to work while I was going to school, I didn't want anything to, to get in the way of me gettin' that degree, and I joined CORE and stayed with CORE for the next 11 years, and did a lotta civil rights work up and down the state and all kinds of...we, we sat-in, and we lived in, in the housing projects. We used to go into one of them old—one of them old houses—and just set up house-keeping there. So, so where there were...a lot of activity, for CORE in L. A. at the time and, when the Black Studies Movement came along, I, I said, "Why not me?" And I applied to to my alma mater, California State University at Los Angeles and also at California State University at Northridge, and Northridge gave me—hired me—and so, I think on the basis of my Civil Rights activity 'cause there were no...there were no education prepared at that time to teach the subject. My field was political science, but...the classes they had was the historical and political experience of the African-American. So I had to go take a summer course in

history—Black history—so I could be prepared to start off, and like a lotta new teachers, I was always you know a couple chapters ahead of the class. Actually, you know a few years later I, I had mastered that, and I think I pretty good and four years later, they divided the classes and I taught like political science, the introduction class and then Black politics classes, and I did that for the next 30 years...30, 33 years. Then I retired, they—the university—gave me emeritus status, and, so I'm now Emeritus Professor in African Studies from California State University at Northridge, a career that I learned to love. It's like playing football for a football player, you're doing what you like to do and gettin' paid, well I was doing what I want—like—to do and was gettin' paid. I can never stay uninvolved...and so it was just in my soul, it was part of my DNA, to, to be involved, so I came down here to, to Jackson, and the next year, I went on the Freedom Highway Project for CORE and I was in North Carolina for about three months, going around trying to desegregate Howard Johnson restaurants, got arrested there in Charlotte. What's the name Charlotte? I've forgotten the name of the city—the largest city in North Carolina—got arrested there 10 days and went all over the state. So...it wasn't a difficult decision for me to get involved. I wanted to. I got the opportunity. I did, and while a lot of folk thought that it would...be a serious impact on my career, it turned out not to be. I, I, I did miss some jobs because of that, I mean some employers thought I was unstable, 'course I didn't look for a job right out of college just went on the Freedom Ride, but, but the job that I really wanted came eight years later and, my experience as a civil rights worker and the Freedom Rider was, were key—was key—to gettin' me involved in that and, I'm so glad I did, and I guess I would—if it came around again today—for some reason or another, I would want to go I mean, when you get to be 75 you know, all the things that you did to your body in those earlier years, your body begin to, to hold you accountable. So, I just had by-pass surgery this January and then I had a, an infection and I've been in the hospital most of the time but when I got the letter signed by the governor and the congressmen saying, "We are inviting you back to Jackson, 'cause we now are, are pleased and happy for what you did," there was no way to keep me outta Jackson, but I told my doctors, first I had to go to the Oprah show. I said, "I got to be out of here by April 26<sup>th</sup>." So they got me—I was out—by April 26<sup>th</sup>, and went on Oprah but, coming back to Jackson, going to Parchman, that tour we had yesterday to Money and it was...matter of fact, I have never been treated so well as here, except, I went to...I went with some friends to Liberia, back in 1979, and they they rolled out the red carpet, but for this ordinary citizen, the only time I had the red carpet rolled out for me was when they got down here Sunday. And I must say that they had everything put together, and everybody has been so friendly—I wonder whether I'm in Mississippi—I mean, it's not the Mississippi I had in my mind, but, but I'm happy to be here, and this, this will be an occasion that I'm gonna keep alive for, well I expect, at least another 20 years so, it'll be alive another 20 years and I, I intend to be at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the

70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. After then, I'm not sure 'cause I'll only be 95 then.

WELCH: Ok. Well thank you so much.

DENNIS: Ok.

**END OF RECORDING**

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